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EPA Proposes To Find More Areas In Attainment With 2010 SO2 NAAQS

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EPA is proposing the final designations for which areas are in attainment or violating the 2010 sulfur dioxide (SO₂) national ambient air quality standards (NAAQS), taking a key step toward completing the long-delayed and extensively litigated attainment designations process for the SO₂ limit that it issued more than 10 years ago.

In proposed designations issued Aug. 13 by Panagiotis Tsirigotis, director of EPA's Office of Air Quality Planning & Standards, EPA finds many of the final areas of the country to be designated for the 2010 NAAQS now meet the standard. The agency will take comment on the attainment and nonattainment designations for 30 days following publication of the findings in a pending *Federal Register* notice.

The agency in June 2010 set its new, hourly SO₂ standard at 75 parts per billion (ppb), but the novel hourly form of the limit required states to either develop new air monitoring sites to measure compliance, or measure compliance using computer modeling, resulting in lengthy delays in implementation.

Ultimately, EPA settled litigation brought by environmentalists by agreeing to a phased designation approach. The agency intends to finalize the last designations by a court-ordered deadline of Dec. 31. Of the 45 proposed designations, EPA finds 34 areas in "unclassifiable/attainment" status, 10 areas in "nonattainment," and one purely "unclassifiable."

EPA in the pending Register notice announcing the designations defines an "unclassifiable/attainment" area as "an area that, based on available information including (but not limited to) appropriate monitoring data and/or modeling analyses, the EPA has determined meets the NAAQS and does not likely contribute to ambient air quality in a nearby area that does not meet the NAAQS."

In contrast, a purely "unclassifiable" area is one where EPA has no basis to make a decision on whether the area meets the NAAQS. Only areas designated in "nonattainment" must craft plans to cut pollution and come into compliance, however.

Because attainment of the one-hour SO₂ NAAQS is primarily linked to emissions from major industrial facilities, areas designated as meeting or violating the standard are typically whole or partial counties surrounding industrial plants.

NAAQS Redesignations

In a separate action, EPA is further proposing to redesignate four areas in Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio and Texas to "attainment" for the SO₂ standard, from their prior status of "unclassifiable."

"Based on newly available data, EPA proposes that four new areas in Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio and Texas be redesignated as being in attainment of air quality standards for sulfur dioxide," said EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler in an Aug. 14 statement. "Improved monitoring shows that during the three-year period between 2017-2019, these areas met the 2010 standards. This is great news and a result of the strong partnerships between local, state and federal authorities," he added.

The areas are: portions of Franklin and St. Charles Counties in Missouri; all of Lancaster County in Nebraska; all of Gallia County and a portion of Meigs County in Ohio; and all of Milam County in Texas.

Sen. Roy Blunt (R-MO) praised both utility Ameren and Missouri state air regulators for progress in achieving SO₂ cuts from the firm's power plants in the state. Ameren Missouri has for years been fighting an EPA enforcement action in the courts over past new source review (NSR) air permit violations, aimed at forcing the company to install new pollution controls to reduce air pollution. "This announcement is great news for our state, especially St. Charles and Franklin Counties," said Blunt in a statement. "Ameren and the Missouri Department of Natural Resources have worked diligently over several years to reach this point. I appreciate the Environmental Protection Agency recognizing those efforts and the success they have achieved."